

How I wish the leadership in the House had allowed them to vote on it. I think we would be in a far better position to deal with these problems with the DREAMers and with those seeking to come into our country. I applaud the Senator from Illinois for never giving up.

Mr. DURBIN. If the Senator from Vermont would yield for just one moment. I want to thank him personally. As chairman of the Senate Judiciary Committee, he has made a point of making sure the DREAM Act, a bill which I introduced 13 years ago, has had a fair hearing before the committee on more than one occasion and has been reported by the committee. It was part of that comprehensive immigration bill. I thank him for bringing it up.

I just want to say for the record that one Republican Senator has said he wants to deport all of the DREAMers. He is in for a fight because these young men and women are proving over and over they can make a valuable contribution to this country. I thank the Senator from Vermont.

(The remarks of Mr. LEAHY pertaining to the introduction of S. 2658 are printed in today's RECORD under "Statements on Introduced Bills and Joint Resolutions.")

Mr. FRANKEN. I yield the floor.

#### CONCLUSION OF MORNING BUSINESS

The PRESIDING OFFICER (Ms. HEITKAMP). Morning business is closed.

#### EXECUTIVE SESSION

#### NOMINATION OF ROBERT ALAN McDONALD TO BE SECRETARY OF VETERANS AFFAIRS

The PRESIDING OFFICER. Under the previous order, the Senate will proceed to executive session to consider the following nomination, which the clerk will report.

The bill clerk read the nomination of Robert Alan McDonald, of Ohio, to be Secretary of Veterans Affairs.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. Under the previous order, the time until 12:30 will be equally divided in the usual form.

The Senator from Vermont.

#### VETERANS HEALTH CARE

Mr. SANDERS. Madam President, as the chairman of the Senate Committee on Veterans' Affairs, I rise today in strong support of the nomination of Robert McDonald to serve as Secretary of Veterans' Affairs.

I also thank Majority Leader REID for moving this important nomination forward as quickly as he has, and I very much hope that later this afternoon, with a very strong vote, the Senate will vote to confirm Robert McDonald as Secretary of the VA.

Before I talk about Mr. McDonald's qualifications, I wish to take a moment

to express my sincere thanks to GEN Eric Shinseki for his dedicated service to our Nation, first as a soldier and then as head of the VA, working tirelessly to provide for those injured during war and the families of those who perished on the battlefield. He set very ambitious goals, and under his leadership VA made significant strides in reducing veteran homelessness and transforming a paper-based claims system to one fit for the 21st century. I thank him and his family very much for his service.

It is my strong belief that Robert McDonald will bring two very important qualities to the position of Secretary of Veterans Affairs.

First, he is familiar with the military as well as the needs of veterans and their families. Mr. McDonald and his family have a history of service to our Nation. Mr. McDonald began his service as a cadet at the United States Military Academy at West Point. He graduated in 1975 in the top 2 percent of his class with a degree in engineering and went on to serve as an infantry officer in the Army's 82nd Airborne, earning Airborne and Ranger qualifications during his military service. His father served in the Army Air Corps after World War II. Additionally, his wife's father was held as a POW after being shot down over Europe. Her uncle served in Vietnam and still receives care at the VA. Also, Mr. McDonald's nephew is currently serving and deployed with the U.S. Air Force. In other words, Mr. McDonald and his family have a deep understanding and service with the U.S. military.

Upon hearing Mr. McDonald at the hearing we held in our committee for the confirmation process, I was convinced that he has a deep passion to do everything he can to protect our veterans.

The other quality Mr. McDonald brings to this job is that he has been the CEO of one of America's leading corporations, a company which has tens of thousands of employees. His more than 33 years with Procter & Gamble gives him the tools to create a well-run and accountable VA. In other words, he will bring the tools of a CEO and a private corporation to the VA—a huge bureaucracy that needs a significant improvement in accountability and in management.

As we begin debate on Mr. McDonald's nomination, I believe it is important that my colleagues understand the realities he will face in leading the VA.

The VA operates the largest integrated health care system in the United States, with over 1,700 points of care which include 150 hospitals, 820 community-based outreach clinics, and 300 vet centers. In fiscal year 2013 the VA provided 89.7 million outpatient visits each day—today, tomorrow, yesterday. The VA conducts approximately 236,000 health care appointments. In other words, it is a huge system.

VA's problems, which Mr. McDonald will have to address immediately, have been widely reported in recent months. In my view, Acting Secretary Sloan Gibson has done an excellent job in taking a number of critical steps to address the problems confronting the VA, but clearly there is much more to be done.

We now know, among other issues, there is a significant shortage of doctors, nurses, and mental health providers within VA, as well as the physical space necessary to provide timely access to quality care. This is a major problem because at the end of the day, no matter how well run the VA is or any health care system is, we are not going to be able to provide quality, timely care unless there are the doctors, nurses, and other medical personnel available to do that work. As a result of the shortages, we know that we have tens of thousands of veterans today in many parts of this country on lists that are much too long in order to gain access to the VA. We also know that hundreds of thousands of veterans who have appointments scheduled are waiting too long to be seen and receive care.

I think it is important that everybody recognize that as a result of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, in the last 5 years 2 million more veterans have come into the VA. This is on top of an aging population of VA patients who served in World War II, Korea, and Vietnam—patients who often need a whole lot of care as they age. So combine new people coming into the VA, often with very serious problems—including some 500,000 veterans coming home from Iraq and Afghanistan with PTSD and TBI—and an aging population with difficult problems, and that is where we are, and those are some of the issues the VA is going to have to address.

While I am on the subject, let me say that most people understand—and that includes many of the veterans I talk to every day in Vermont, veterans across the country, and the national veterans organizations that represent millions of veterans—that once people get into the VA system, in general the quality of care is good. That is not just what veterans and their organizations say; that is what a number of independent studies show. Our problem right now is how to figure out a way that when people apply for VA health care, they get into the system quickly and that once they are in the system, they get the appointments they need in a timely manner. That is our job. It is not going to be an easy job, but that is the job we face.

My hope is that tomorrow or Thursday the House and the Senate will be voting on a comprehensive piece of legislation authored by Congressman JEFF MILLER, chairman of the House Veterans' Affairs Committee, and me. I think it is terribly important that we pass that bipartisan legislation with a strong vote in both Houses because